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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHENNAI 000059

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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: SRI LANKA BECOMES AN ELECTION ISSUE, WILL HURT DMK

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Classified By: Acting Principal Officer Frederick J. Kaplan for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

REF: A) Chennai 039 B) 2008 Chennai 362 C) 2007 Chennai 690

11. (C) Summary: Increasingly harsh coverage of the war in Sri Lanka in the Tamil Nadu press has shifted public opinion in the state. Expressions of support for the LTTE, once limited to the fringe of the state's politics, are becoming more commonplace. Representatives of an umbrella organization of political parties, including the president of a party represented in India's ruling United Progressive Alliance, asked the United States to remove the designation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as a terrorist organization. For the first time since the 1991 assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, Sri Lanka looks likely to be a factor in the upcoming parliamentary elections in Tamil Nadu. The issue will likely hurt the electoral prospects of the state's ruling DMK party. End summary.

Tamil media fuels the fire  
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12. (C) Tamil Nadu media outlets cover events on the island extensively, with an emphasis on sensationalist, often unverified stories. T.S. Subramaniam, who covers Tamil Nadu politics for The Hindu and Frontline magazine, told post that the types of gruesome images featured in the LTTE propaganda video circulated in Chennai in the fall of 2008 (ref B) have become common in Tamil media coverage of Sri Lanka. We have observed increasingly graphic pictures of wounded and severely injured women and children in political posters around Chennai.

13. (C) In a hastily called meeting, M.K. Pathmanaathan, Political Counselor, Sri Lankan Deputy High Commission in Chennai, reached out to us to express concern about the political climate in Tamil Nadu. Pathmanaathan worried about increasing amounts of anti-Sri Lanka propaganda in the Tamil media. He said that "30 to 50 per cent of the stories each day in some newspapers are about Sri Lanka. We don't know where many of them come from; they are just made up." He cited recent stories describing Government of Sri Lanka camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) as "concentration camps." Pathmanaathan said the "media narrative is getting out of control."

14. (C) Pathmanaathan has good reason to be concerned. The "concentration camp" label appears to have taken root in Tamil Nadu and beyond. A Google search for "Sri Lanka Concentration Camps" returns numerous hits, including "Barbed wire villages raise fears of

refugee concentration camps" in The Times and "Sri Lanka plans to hold displaced Tamils in "concentration camps" in The Telegraph. Stories in the international media are seen as confirmation of the Tamils' worst fears. We heard references to the IDP facilities as "concentration camps" on several occasions.

15. (C) Subramaniam said the "Tamil media is on fire" with stories of the "suffering of Sri Lankan Tamils." Subramaniam, who writes in English, told post that "if you are only reading the English language press you are not seeing the anger." M.S.S. Pandian, a historian who specializes in Tamil political parties, agreed that Tamil language news coverage is fueling anger about the suffering of Sri Lankan Tamils. K.P. Sunil, the news editor for the AIADMK-affiliated Jaya TV, sounded a discordant note. He said that the "majority" of Tamil language media outlets, including his own, were not devoting especially great attention to events in Sri Lanka. Sunil did, however, acknowledge that a few Tamil media sources did play up the Sri Lanka angle due to their "political affiliation." He specifically cited Makkal TV for its "inflammatory" coverage of violence against Tamil civilians in Sri Lanka. (Note: Makkal TV, which is affiliated with Tamil Nadu's PMK party, figured prominently in our conversations about the Tamil media's fixation on Sri Lanka. End Note.)

Support for LTTE moves out of the  
dark corners of Tamil Nadu politics  
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16. (C) The unrelenting coverage of alleged Sri Lankan atrocities against Tamils has moved public opinion in Tamil Nadu. M.S.S. Pandian said that the public increasingly sees the LTTE, despite its odious history, as the only entity which can prevent the elimination of Sri Lanka's Tamil population. He added there is widespread distrust of the Sri Lankan government in Tamil Nadu. According to Pandian, the distrust stems from the Rajapaksa government's "Sinhala nationalism and militarism." He said Sri Lanka's practice of restricting access to the North exacerbates Tamil mistrust. Worries

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about a potential genocide -- a term used frequently in Tamil political conversations these days -- combine with mistrust of the Sri Lankan government to make support of the LTTE seem, at this point in time, an unpalatable but necessary last resort.

17. (C) T.S. Subramaniam of The Hindu told us that "people sitting in air-conditioned offices" are not seeing the ongoing shift in public sentiment towards open expressions of support for the LTTE as the last defense for Sri Lanka's Tamils. Referring to the young man who self-immolated himself last month (ref A), Subramaniam said "although the English language press did not cover it, more than 30,000 people came to Muthukumar's memorial service" (including, we would note, M.K. Stalin, son and heir apparent of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Karunanidhi). Subramaniam went on to describe how MDMK leader Vaiko took out his mobile phone on stage at Muthukumar's memorial service, apparently called LTTE leaders in Sri Lanka, and passed along their sympathies to the assembled crowd. Subramaniam told post this type of open support for the LTTE is especially common amongst young people, who have no memory of the Gandhi assassination.

18. (C) On February 20, representatives of the Sri Lankan Tamils Protection Forum, an umbrella group made up of leaders of Tamil Nadu parties and state-level representatives of national parties, visited Consulate General Chennai to present a petition urging the U.S. government to act on behalf of the Sri Lankan Tamils. The group was composed of Vaiko (President, MDMK), S. Ramadoss (Founder, PMK), Thol Tirumavalavan (President, VCK), P. Nedumaran (President, Tamil Nationalist Movement), L. Ganesan (Tamil Nadu State Secretary, Bharatiya Janata Party), and D. Pandian (Tamil Nadu State Secretary, Communist Party of India). During the meeting, Tirumavalavan urged the United States to remove the designation of the LTTE as a terrorist organization, arguing that the LTTE is a "liberation movement." Vaiko, as expected, echoed Tirumavalavan. Vaiko's MDMK and Tirumavalavan's VCK exist at the militant fringe of Tamil Nadu politics; Vaiko, for example, was arrested last fall for reportedly saying he would not hesitate to take up arms against Sri Lanka. (Note: The BJP's L. Ganesan and the CPI's D. Pandian both moved

themselves back from the table as if to physically distance themselves from Tirumavalavan and Vaiko's pro-LTTE statements, though they did not verbally dissent. End note.)

¶9. (C) More notable, however, was that S. Ramadoss of the PMK supported Tirumavalavan and Vaiko's call to de-list the LTTE. Ramadoss's PMK is part of the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in New Delhi. His son is the Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare. Ramadoss is the consummate political opportunist. Since forming the PMK he has regularly managed to ensure his party is in the winning alliance in Tamil Nadu. Ramadoss has vacillated in his support for the LTTE. He openly called for India to lift the ban on the terrorist organization as recently as 2002, but muted his position when the PMK became part of the UPA government in 2004. Ramadoss's urging the United States to de-list the LTTE is an indication he feels political sentiment in Tamil Nadu is moving in a more LTTE-sympathetic direction. Such a shift represents a major departure from the previous consensus view that revulsion over the 1991 assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi left the LTTE with virtually no grassroots support in Tamil Nadu (ref C).

Sri Lanka figures to be an election issue  
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¶10. (C) Sri Lanka has not played a role in an election here since 1991, when an AIADMK/Congress alliance swept the polls held just weeks after the Rajiv Gandhi assassination. But barring a major intervening event, we believe that Sri Lanka stands to play a significant role in the parliamentary elections that are likely to take place in April in Tamil Nadu. Post's contacts were unanimous in agreeing that this year Sri Lanka will be an election issue.

¶11. (C) Kanimozhi, DMK Member of Parliament and daughter of DMK Chief Minister Karunanidhi, told post that "unlike in the past, it (Sri Lanka) is likely to be an election issue." Subramaniam said "Tamil Nadu's mindset has changed." K. Veeramani, President of the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK, from which the DMK and AIADMK split), told us that "Sri Lanka will affect the elections." The Sri Lankan Deputy High Commission's Pathmanaathan said events in his country will "definitely" have an impact on elections in Tamil Nadu. He said he saw nothing that could happen in Sri Lanka between now and the elections that would diffuse the potential impact of the conflict there on Tamil Nadu's elections.

Sri Lanka hurting the DMK  
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¶12. (C) Our contacts also agreed that the DMK is at the losing end of the increased attention on Sri Lanka. Kanimozhi candidly told post "the DMK stand on Sri Lanka does not represent the general consensus in Tamil Nadu." She admitted "the DMK cadre is not satisfied with the party's approach." Sunil of Jaya TV highlighted the DMK's particular vulnerability to the Sri Lanka issue: "the DMK could be hurt because its base is much more sympathetic to the Sri Lankan cause." Subramaniam told us that a member of the Chief Minister's personal security detail told him that Karunanidhi had "betrayed" the Tamils by not standing up for them. "If this is the kind of thing his own security people are telling me, imagine what the common man is saying," said Subramaniam.

¶13. (C) We saw DMK disquiet with Karunanidhi's handling of Sri Lanka in a February 10 meeting with a group of community organizers, most of whom identified themselves as strong DMK supporters. Only one of the ten DMK supporters raised his hand to express satisfaction with Karunanidhi, and he did so quite sheepishly as if expecting the other nine to turn on him. Those who did not raise their hands in support of the Chief Minister were circumspect in their responses, saying things like "he is our leader," but were unhappy with the DMK's failure to take a more aggressively "pro-Tamil" response.

Comment: Karunanidhi overplayed his hand  
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¶14. (C) Comment: Sri Lanka and the plight of its Tamils emerged as

a potential election issue for reasons largely out of the DMK's control. The government of Sri Lanka has proceeded with its military campaign, slowly cornering the LTTE in an ever shrinking space. Tamil Nadu has been flooded with news of the war, much of it LTTE propaganda. The Sri Lanka government's failure to consistently respect human rights, coupled with its lack of transparency, have swayed a substantial segment of public opinion from seeing the LTTE as one of the world's worst terrorist groups to viewing it as the only thing standing between the island's Tamils and genocide.

¶15. (C) Comment continued: But Karunanidhi is at least partially to blame for the degree to which the issue plays against the DMK. He overplayed his hand in October 2008 when he threatened to pull the DMK MP's from the UPA if India did not force a ceasefire in Sri Lanka. The threat raised expectations among his base, which he dashed when he backed down. The episode exposed Karunanidhi to charges of "impotence," "betrayal," and "hypocrisy," all which his opponents liberally, and effectively, deployed. By the time the LTTE's stronghold in Kilinochchi fell, Karunanidhi had little credibility left, even among his core supporters. His attempts to reassure the people of Tamil Nadu that he was doing all he could, through the Government of India, to influence the situation in Sri Lanka fell on mostly deaf ears. The DMK's best hope is that events in India or elsewhere surpass Sri Lanka in the minds of the Tamil Nadu electorate before the upcoming elections. End comment.

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